HEIRS OF THE GRACE OF LIFE
I Peter 3:7
November 19, 1978

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Text: "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"(I Corinthians 4:7).

"...We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." (Romans 8:16-17).

To me one of the beautiful phrases in Scripture, as well as one of the great mysteries of life, is in the phrase used by Peter in writing to the early church: "You are joint heirs of the grace of life." You will perhaps recognize it as a phrase used in our marriage service.

A few years ago I was browsing in a bookstore and bought a book entitled "The Last Caprice" by Robert S. Menchin. It deals with wills. Peculiar wills, vindictive wills, wills written on all sorts of paper - a menu, a dance program, a hospital chart, etc. Conditional wills tell of a Californian named John Quincy Murray who died in 1929 and gave $3,000 to two granddaughters on condition they give up bobbed hair, rouge and powder, jewelry, dances and movies and that they wear their dresses "long at both ends". He left $1,000 to his grandson provided he would forego dances and motion pictures and that he would never grow a moustache. A Vienna banker made a large bequest to his nephew and stipulated he should "never, on any occasion, read a newspaper, his favorite occupation."

There have been many peculiar wills - such as to maintain cats - as well as many wonderful things done through wills for those who become heirs to a fortune. One interesting case I noted was in Oakland, 1922, where 203 persons entered the court of Judge E.S.Robinson to claim a share of $350,000 left by a San Francisco night club owner, Joseph Bisagno. Among the heirs were society women, waitresses, matrons, bootblacks, headwaiters, actresses, hat check girls, judges, attorneys, physicians, businessmen, city officials, cafe owners, bartenders; all "friends who had been kind to me".

One of the more interesting cases was that of a New York tailor who died in 1880. He left instructions in his will something like this: "I own 71 pairs of trousers and I strictly enjoin my executors to hold a public sale at which these shall be sold to the highest bidder, and the proceeds distributed to the poor of the city. I desire that these garments shall in no way be examined or meddled with but be disposed of as they are found at the time of my death; and no purchaser to buy more than one pair." The sale was held and the 71 pairs of trousers were sold to 71 different purchasers. As each purchaser examined his purchase he had to cut the thread to open the pockets which were sewed up and there he found a packet containing $1,000 in bank notes.

So we humans do whimisical things to our heirs and with the possessions over which we have control.

The Scriptures tell us and we know from our experience that we are all heirs in a very real sense. Heirs of One who has given to us the very best things of life and life itself. The most precious thing we have indeed is life. And how did we secure this? Certainly not by the whims of an arbitrary giver who wishes to have some fun with a helpless human. Certainly, also, not because of our deserts. How

did I earn or merit a sound body and a clear mind? If you doubt the clarity of my mind I can just as easily put the question in the second person and ask how did you earn your clear mind? It was given you at birth. It has developed, to be sure, as you have used it through the years; and the more you use it the better it becomes. But the gift of body and mind was truly a gift and not a reward for merit. So Paul asks the Corinthians "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" And to the Romans Paul writes: "We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."

But Peter in his epistle adds just another factor. We are "joint heirs". I do not stand alone as an heir. I stand with others and jointly share the inheritance.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday I am grateful that I have the companionship of others. For years I have been sustained by loved ones - Father, Mother, Brothers, Sister, Wife, Children, Grandchildren. What would life be without them? Even if I owned the whole of the inheritance, and all the wealth of the world, it would mean nothing without being able to share it. Among my privileges is to visit the elderly and the sick. There is hardly anything more difficult for me to bear than to see a person who seems to be all alone and without friends. On the other hand, though aged and weak with years I have seen great joy in the eyes of one who spoke of a good friend, or of the life partner through many years.

We can be thankful we are not the sole heirs of life with all its joys if we had no one to enjoy them with us; such joys would only be sorrow and the taste of them bitter in the end.

I found my spirit lifted some time ago when I visited with a woman 80 or more years old, confined to bed as she was. She spoke of her good life. She spoke of her family companionship. She praised God for the fullness of her life even in her weakness. There was no grumbling, no complaining, no feeling of being misused because she was sick. She understood something of having inherited a life she had not earned.

What an inheritance you and I have! The culture of the ages - Beauty of Greece, Wisdom of the Sages, Order of the Romans, Democracy for the English. We are only just beginning to appreciate the patience of the Orient, sensitivity of the Asian, Indian, the strength and classic grace of the Chinese, the simplicity of Japanese art. These are all ours. But added to them is the wealth of the New World, and the inventiveness of the American people. Wealthier than most kings, spoiled by abundance it is easy to forget our dependence upon others. We are <u>joint heirs</u> for the good things of life.

But life is one of <u>grace</u>. It is undeserved. We in America ought to understand this better than anyone else. When we read the news and saw pictures of Viet Nam, I recalled our trip through that country, true in most of the Orient. Two meals a day - and no snacks is the regular thing. Regularly beggars would go through the garbage dumps for little scraps. We talk of hunger until we are tired of hearing that half the world goes to bed hungry. But no hunger is very important until it is your own hunger. For months on end during the winter and spring the farmers of China would eat nothing but kafir corn (we feed it to hogs and not very good feed at that), a few salted turnips and occasionally some sweet potatoes. Only on special occasions - holidays, birthdays, weddings, funerals - might there be some pork or mutton.

I have seen coolies of Southwest China carrying out goods over the ruts, wince with pain and take out their opium pipes for a smoke at the rest stop, just to stop the pain of ulcers, or deep seated disease. I have been approached by beggars - one after another along a stretch of road leading to a market or temple - one every few feet. I have had the coolies at a railroad station fight to pick up my bags in order to earn a few pennies. Yes, I have seen people dying of hunger and pain. For two years during the Sino-Japanese War I administered relief, food kitchens, road building sewing projects to keep a few thousand out of the millions from starving. I have shared the one towel with twenty others before a meal when half the people had sore eyes, trachoma perhaps, because there was not enough money to buy another towel. As the guest from America I was to be treated with proper courtesy and allowed to use the towel first. I have seen the strength and stoicism with which those patient people saw their houses bombed and cities burned.

Then I returned to this bountiful land - rich by comparison even in war time. I did not deserve the plenty, nearly as much as those who had worked so long and hard for a few bites of bread, but I enjoyed and continue to enjoy the fullness of our country. Was the gold in the hills placed there by our labors? Was the oil of Texas and Alaska stored there by man? Was the fertility of our wonderful prairies a result of our goodness or effort? Were the gigantic redwoods and the forests from Maine to Washington the result of my foresight? Does the fact that I can eat turkey today and steak tomorrow if I want to make me better than Mr. and Mrs. Kung of Terghsien where I grew up, descendants of the great Confucius, who could have only a bowl of noodles and a few mouthfuls of pork on their thanksgiving day?

Until we have lived with scarcity, the kind that brings death by starvation, we don't quite understand the grace of life - the undeserved and unearned gifts of God. How grateful I am for a warm house. I have spent months in Chinese homes where ice was forming on the pond outside and ice was also forming in the wash basin inside the house. How grateful I would be when I returned home to find a fire in the one black iron stove in the living room though all the rest of the house remained cold.

Perhaps I am privileged above most of you. I have lived with those who had so little, yet were strong and good; and therefore, I believe I understand something of the fullness of life that we enjoy. We are heirs of the grace of the <u>full</u> life. But even more we are heirs of the life in God.

You see I have also lived in a Chinese village of about 500 people where there were only about a dozen who could read and write. Superstition controlled their lives. On a tree near the entrance of the village were hung eggshells, feathers, the skin of an animal, little paper streamers, and a multitude of other worthless objects just to keep the evil spirits away. I have seen the streams of people going to the Taoist Temple on a feast day, there to throw their few coins at the foot of the idols, in worship to appease their displeasure or to ask a favor. I have seen the priests making their incantations over the sick, the dying, the blind, the deformed, burning incense before the Kuchean god or god of wealth. I have seen the charms children wore to drive off the spirits, but the same children diseased and deformed. The demented left to be the laughing stock of the town and to die neglected. Unwanted baby girls left on our door step were fortunate. They would be cared for. Others were left exposed to die on the common graveyard outside the city.

We are children of God and we know it. But we are no more God's children than are those of the town of Yuankiang who didn't know it and were bound by their superstitions and ignorance. The grace of life - not earned by me - but enjoyed by me!

God forgive if I forget that God himself has suffered that I might be free. "Heirs of the grace of life." And I give thanks, though my thanks will not be complete until I see God's children everywhere enjoy the fullness of God's gifts, and know that they also are "joint heirs of the grace of life."